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ABSTRACT

The Youth Opportunities Unlimited (YOU) program was created to prevent at-risk students from low-income families from dropping out of high school. Students aged 14 or 15 years old entering 9th or 10th grade went to a college campus for 60 days during the summer to attend English and mathematics classes, work 20 hours per week, and receive instruction in other subjects. A YOU Follow-Up Project was developed to provide a mechanism for offering encouragement and support to program graduates throughout their high school careers and for evaluating the program. Activities included a quarterly check of students' grades and attendance records, quarterly newsletters sent to students, periodic telephone contact with students, and year-end tape-recorded interviews with students and their families. The evaluation component examined the effectiveness of the YOU program and the Follow-Up Project. Of 106 graduates of the YOU program at Arkansas State University in 1989 and 1990, 98 were enrolled in school at the end of the 1990 school year. The Follow-Up Project enabled personnel to continue contacts with YOU graduates and provided information on program effectiveness. The following problems were identified: the expensive and time-consuming interview process, difficulty in getting grade reports, limited contact with graduates, and difficulty with keeping track of students. Recommendations were for more contact with students, fewer requests for grades and attendance records, and discontinuance of taped interviews. (YLB)

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FINAL REPORT

THE YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES UNLIMITED FOLLOWUP PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

The Youth Opportunities Unlimited program was created for the purpose of preventing students from dropping out of high school. Participants in the program are 14 or 15 years old, entering either ninth or tenth grade, and come from low income families. They have been identified by their school counselor or principal as being at risk of dropping out of school. They go to a college campus for 60 days during the summer, where they attend English and math classes, work 20 hours a week, receive instruction in health, physical education, study skills, job skills, and various electives. On the weekends, the students go on field trips for educational and recreational activities. The purposes of the program are to allow the students to earn high school credit to help them progress toward graduation, to learn job skills which will be useful throughout their lives, and to gain self-confidence and self-esteem.

The program works toward giving students the motivation and the means to be successful in high school and beyond. By giving students a new setting in which they have not experienced failure and by giving them a fresh start, the Y.O.U. program strives to change students' attitudes toward themselves, school, work, and society.

While there seems to be a remarkable difference in many of the students by the end of the program, there is no provision for following the students' progress through high school. Changes wrought by the program may be short-lived

when the students are returned to their original environment. Some mechanism was needed to offer students support throughout their high school careers and to gather data that would indicate the degree of success of the program.

Thus, the Y.O.U. Followup Project was born. Using Program Improvement funds from the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act, the Followup Project helps to fill the gap in the Y.O.U. program. Specifically, it provides a mechanism for offering encouragement and support to the graduates of the Y.O.U. program throughout their high school careers and it allows the program's effectiveness to be evaluated.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the Y.O.U. Followup Project are as follows:

1. To gather data to be used in evaluating the success of the Y.O.U. summer program.
2. To maintain contact with Y.O.U. students through their high school years.
3. To provide students with encouragement to persevere through the difficult times and remain in school.
4. To give students a positive contact person outside their usual circle of friends and family.
5. To remind students that their possibilities for the future extend beyond their current circumstances.

PROCEDURES

There are a number of activities in the Y.O.U. Followup Project aimed at achieving the objectives outlined above. First, all students' grades and attendance records are checked quarterly. This is done by requesting transcripts or grade reports from each student's school. Students and their parents sign documents giving school personnel permission to release this information to the Y.O.U. Followup Project.

Second, students are sent newsletters quarterly. These newsletters provide information such as ACT test deadlines and upcoming events, as well as updates on their fellow students, their birthdays, honor roll listings, and messages. Some motivational articles are also included in the newsletters.

Third, students are contacted by telephone periodically throughout the year. Finally, tape-recorded interviews are conducted at the end of each school year with the students and their families.

EVALUATION

The evaluation of the Y.O.U. Followup Project is an integral part of the program, and it is inseparable from the Y.O.U. summer program. It is impossible to say, for example, whether the summer program or some component in the Followup Project was more influential in keeping a student in school. The evaluation component of the Followup Project examines the effectiveness of the two programs combined. This is

accomplished through the data collection and interview components described above.

Of the 106 graduates of the Youth Opportunities Unlimited program at Arkansas State University in 1989 and 1990, 98 were known to be enrolled in school at the end of the 1990 school year. Two students' whereabouts are unknown, one school does not respond to requests for information, and five students are known to have withdrawn from school. Student comments about the program are quite positive. For example, one students said, "Thanks for giving me a new attitude." Numerous others voice their determination not only to finish high school, but to attend college as well.

Comments from school personnel have been even more positive. Most of the remarks express surprise at the changes in the students over the course of the summer. Grades improve. The number of days students are in class also goes up. The worst comments are that a particular student has not changed, but these are relatively rare.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Y.O.U. Followup Project has been quite successful overall. It has been the vehicle for gaining information about the success of the summer program. Additionally, it has enhanced the success of the summer program by enabling Y.O.U. personnel to continue their contacts with the Y.O.U. graduates. In many cases, this extended contact has allowed the staff members to discuss problems with students and to

resolve them in ways that allow the students to remain in school, or to strengthen the student's determination to continue. In short, this program has given students a contact with someone in the world outside their usual sphere of operation who can help the student view situations with some objectivity. Such a contact can be extremely helpful when everyone in the student's world has a vested interest in the student's decision.

Another important contribution of the Y.O.U. Followup Project has been the lessons learned about the effectiveness of the summer program. This information is important, not just for program evaluation purposes, but for application in future programs. Coupled with knowledge gained from other projects, then, the information gained from this project has the potential to contribute to similar programs for years to come.

In spite of the positive aspects of the Y.O.U. Followup Project, there are problems that exist in it. The tape-recorded interview process, for example, is quite expensive and time-consuming. Also, the interviews come at a time when preparations are under way for the summer program, making satisfactory accomplishment of both tasks very difficult, since the same personnel are involved in both activities. Because the Y.O.U. program is a summer program, most of the employees work only during the summer. This leaves most of the preliminary work to be done by a small number of people. With the program director involved in this work, it is very

difficult to adequately monitor the work of the Followup coordinator. If the followup work is not being done adequately, it is sometimes too late to correct the problem before school is out. For example, if the arrangements are not made for interviews to be conducted prior to the end of the school term, getting them done at all is virtually impossible.

Another problem that exists is the difficulty in getting grade reports from schools. Everyone realizes that school personnel are quite busy, and responding to requests for quarterly grade and attendance reports is an added burden for them, but some schools are very slow about responding to these requests. The person responsible for these reports is not always easy to find, either. Usually it is the counselor, but some responses from counselors suggest that our requests should be sent to the principal. At any rate, having to send two or three requests for this information is an unnecessary burden on the limited resources (money and staff time) of the program.

Limited contact with program graduates is another problem. To expect one 60-day period to have a lasting impact on a student is unrealistic. The Followup Project certainly helps in this regard, but the contacts are limited at best. These students are usually in the same environment that served to bring about their at-risk status in the first place. To expect that the memory of 60 days on a college campus will sustain students in their newly developed habits

when everything around them is pulling them to return to their old habits is to deny reality. While the periodic contact of the Followup Project is helpful, it is not enough.

Finally, keeping up with students is sometimes a monumental task. Some of the parents or guardians of these students move frequently, often without leaving a forwarding address. Tracking them down is often a time-consuming, frustrating task which is not always successful. The small number of students who have been lost is a tribute to the determination of the Followup staff at the local and state levels.

Practical recommendations are not always easy to formulate. Since the Followup Project is at a crossroads, however, recommendations are even more important than usual in a report of this nature. As the search for new funding goes forward, the author of this report feels that the recommendations presented below should be built into the new proposals.

First, the Followup Project should be expanded to include more contact between the Y.O.U. graduates and the Y.O.U. staff. The Y.O.U. II program could serve as a model for this expansion. Whatever the design of the new program is, however, it should be available to all Y.O.U. graduates each year until they finish high school.

Second, the requests for grades and attendance records should be cut back to once each semester, and more emphasis should be placed on direct contact with students during the

regular school year. This change could make it easier to get the requested reports from schools, and the semester reports would include the quarterly information. The increased contacts with the students should provide additional opportunities for staff members to have positive influences on the students.

Third, tape-recording the interviews should be discontinued. Transcription of these interviews is unbelievably difficult and time consuming. Instead, interviews could be an on-going part of the staff contacts with students. Notes from these informal sessions could provide valuable information for the evaluation of the program. Such information would be untainted by the formal interview process which tends to make some interviewees think that they must say good things because they have a vested interest in the program. Many of them feel that to criticize the program in a formal evaluation interview is to criticize their participation in it.

There is little that can be done to address the problem of students who "disappear" from the Followup Project. Perhaps a program which continues for more than one year would encourage students to keep in contact with staff members. The good work of the staff on this problem should be continued, of course.

Finally, the Y.O.U. Followup Project performs a valuable service for the students it serves, and it adds to the knowledge of the problems that it addresses. It should be

continued, with some modifications, and it should be expanded in scope. Ideally, it should be recognized as an integral part of the Youth Opportunities Unlimited program and funded as such. Without such recognition and funding, the Followup Project will be viewed as an expendable afterthought. With such recognition and funding, the Followup Project can make an effective program an outstanding one.